Alcohol and the Ambivalence of the Early English East India Company-State

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Abstract

This article explores the various roles that alcohol played in defining the governance of East India Company fortifications and settlements in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It argues that, much like elsewhere in Europe, Asia, and the colonial world, alcohol was absolutely crucial to political and social life, as well as a source of great revenue and profit for both the Company and individuals who worked for it. At the same time, it was a cause of immense anxiety and concern for Company government, which understood the use (and overuse) of alcohol as a principal sign of potential disorder and disobedience. Far from a contradiction, this ambivalence towards alcohol formed a foundation for a variety of regulatory instruments, from tavern licences to taxation, that were crucial to the establishment of early Company governance and a prime reflection of the Company’s very own ambivalent nature as both merchant and sovereign.

People will be Apt to Say that at this Island the Old proverb is true about Settlements: that where the English settle they First build a punchhouse, the Dutch a Fort, and the Portuguise a Church.¹

No two characters seem more inconsistent than those of trader and sovereign. If the trading spirit of the English East India Company render them very bad sovereigns; the spirit of sovereignty seems to have rendered them equally bad traders.²

From the opium wars to the romanticized origins of the gin and tonic or Indian pale ale (IPA), intoxicants have long taken centre stage in the making of British

¹ St Helena consultations, 7 Apr. 1711, British Library (BL), India Office Records (IOR), G/32/4/4, fo. 65.
² Adam Smith, An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations (3 vols., London, 1784), III, p. 245.
India, even if they have frequently been cast in a supporting rather than starring role in the telling of that history. Certainly by the time of the English East India Company’s founding in 1600 and its expansion across the seventeenth century, stimulants, depressants, and hallucinogens alike – whether employed for medicinal, recreational, spiritual, or other purposes – had become key commodities fuelling both Eurasian commerce and European involvement in the regional ‘country trade’. As the Company grew into a territorial power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it continued to trade in a variety of intoxicants but also came to claim monopolies on the regulation, sale, and control of them as a sovereign right, not unlike other valuable luxuries and staples such as salt. Regulating intoxicants also became critical to a range of colonial policies, from public health to martial discipline, as well as one technique in maintaining and policing racial and class boundaries in colonial society. Certainly the cultural stereotype of the East India Company employee or Anglo-Indian became indelibly attached to various drugs and their attendant rituals. Perhaps most famous among these images was that of the eighteenth-century ‘nabob’, almost synonymous with Arthur William Devis’s iconic portrait of William Hickey partaking of his huqqa.

Then, of course, there was tea. Hardly known in England in the seventeenth century, by the time of the Company’s acquisition of the diwani in Bengal and its rapid expansion across the subcontinent, tea had become a mainstay and staple both of the Company’s commerce and of British leisure culture, its profound effects reaching into everything from the spaces of modern ‘public’

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4 Anna Winterbottom, Hybrid knowledge in the early East India Company world (Basingstoke, 2016).


political discourse (along with coffee) to the iconic protests that fuelled the American rebellion. It also stimulated trade in other drugs, notably the opium that helped finance the early China tea trade. While perhaps not immediately understood today as an ‘intoxicant’, tea’s physiological effects, alongside its cultural symbolism, prompted widespread anxieties not unlike other drug panics of the early modern or modern age. As tea consumption exploded in eighteenth-century Europe and it took on greater and greater economic, cultural, and medical significance, any number of tracts were written and sermons preached about its ill effects on the body natural and the body politic alike. Literally rooted in tropical soil, the perceived threat it posed to displace more traditional social forms of intoxication, like ale, led many a critic to lament the ways in which tea, as one put it, ‘unstrings the nerves, it unbrates the constitution, dissolves nature, and destroys the Englishman’.

In other words, the relationship between empire and intoxicants was at least as ‘ambiguous and often contradictory’ as it was at home, if perhaps amplified by the frequently precarious state of Britons’ bodies – not to mention the British body politic – in India. On the one hand, intoxicants were the source of great profits, a much-demanded luxury and privilege, and, certainly in the case of some like tea, ultimately a symbol of Britishness itself. On the other hand, they were imbued with the great anxieties about maintaining control of oneself and others abroad, and threatened capitulation to moral and political indolence at home, a means by which the British constitution, in both senses of the word, would be poisoned by the sorts of luxury and despotism that had felled Rome in the wake of its encounter with Asia. After all, as much as Hickey may have represented the growing power of the Anglo-Indian nabob, he was careful to protest that, while other ‘men declare

8 The book that launched a thousand dissertations on this, of course, was the translation of Jürgen Habermas’s *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA, 1989, repr. 2015). See also Steve Pincus, “‘Coffee politicians does create’: coffeehouses and restoration political culture’, *Journal of Modern History*, 67 (1995), pp. 807–34; and Brian Cowan, *The social life of coffee: the emergence of the British coffeehouse* (New Haven, CT, 2005). For an important correction, however, see Phil Withington, ‘Where was the coffee in early modern England?’, *Journal of Modern History*, 92 (2019), pp. 40–75.

9 Benjamin L. Carp, *Defiance of the patriots: the Boston tea party and the making of America* (New Haven, CT, 2010), among many others.

10 An essay on tea, sugar, white bread and butter, country alehouses, strong beer, and geneva, and other modern luxuries (Salisbury, 1777), pp. 13–14. The literature on this subject is far too extensive to summarise here. For a start, see selected essays in Philip Lawson, *A taste for empire and glory: studies in British overseas expansion, 1660–1800* (Brookfield, VT, 1997); James Walvin, *Fruits of empire: exotic produce and British taste, 1660–1800* (Washington Square, NY, 1997). For a recent appraisal of these concerns in the early modern Netherlands, see Wouter Ryckbosch, ‘From spice to tea: on consumer choice and the justification of value in the early modern Low Countries’, *Past & Present*, 242 (2019), pp. 37–78.


they would much rather be deprived of their dinner than their hookah’, he himself – much as the US President Bill Clinton would infamously describe his youthful experiments (in England) with cannabis two centuries later – had ‘tried it, but did not like it’.\footnote{William Hickey, Memoirs of William Hickey: vol II (1775–1782), ed. Alfred Spencer (New York, NY, 1923), p. 136. As Clinton famously said about his drug use, ‘when I was in England I experimented with marijuana a time or two, and I didn’t like it. I didn’t inhale it, and never tried it again.’ Gwen Ifill, ‘Clinton admits experiment with marijuana in 1960s’, New York Times, 30 Mar. 1992, p. A1.}

Though alcohol is frequently far more taken for granted in this history of colonial intoxication than stimulants or opioids, the East India Company’s early history with it was no different. Alcohol was a commodity, a medicine, an escape, an incentive, a reward, and even just a reminder of home. At the same time, it was the source of much political and social unease: a perceived (and perhaps actual) threat to good order, obedience, morality, and discipline. This was especially true in the Company’s growing network of fortified settlements, which were centres of civil, military, and social life: sites that sought to project commercial and political power but also to maintain a well-ordered colonial society of settlers drawn from throughout the Eurasian world. These English practices were situated within and reflected the role that alcohol played in shaping and conditioning both European and South Asian political, social, and cultural practices in seventeenth-century India.\footnote{Prasun Chatterjee, ‘The lives of alcohol in pre-colonial India’, Medieval History Journal, 8 (2005), pp. 189–225.}

The ambivalence towards alcohol in early Company India also resembled Anglo-British experiences elsewhere across the colonial world. In early seventeenth-century Ireland and North America, alcoholic beverages similarly served as sources of revenue and profit, and mediums of commercial, social, and diplomatic exchange, but their consumption among planters, enslaved peoples, and indigenous peoples alike both produced a great source of anxiety among colonial officials and destabilized and devastated indigenous communities.\footnote{Peter C. Mancall, Deadly medicine: Indians and alcohol in early America (Ithaca, NY, 2018); Audrey Horning, Ireland in the Virginian sea: colonialism in the British Atlantic (Chapel Hill, NC, 2013), pp. 208, 235–6; Audrey Horning, “‘The root of all vice and bestiality’: exploring the cultural role of the alehouse in the Ulster plantation’, in James Lyttleton and Colin Rynne, eds., Plantation Ireland: settlement and material culture, c.1550–c.1700 (Dublin, 2009), pp. 113–31.} Likewise, in late nineteenth-century West Africa, one British official could muse in 1888 that, in the tropics, even the most abstemious of Englishmen might ‘give themselves up to excesses in eating, drinking, and venery that in their English frame of mind would disgust them’, just as the importation of alcohol constituted a significant aspect of the Royal Niger Company’s business.\footnote{Report by Vice-Consul Johnston on the British protectorate of the oil rivers (Niger delta), Royal Niger Company correspondence, 1888, The National Archives, Foreign Office records (TNA, FO) 401/76, fos. 254, 294; Report on the administration of the Niger coast protectorate, August 1891 to August 1894 (London, 1895), p. 8.} While the contexts and particular histories may be different, as in those cases and many others, alcohol in the East India Company’s Asia did not merely represent or symbolize the dilemmas of expansion. As a trade good, an object of regulation, and both a tool and a problem of governance and...
exchange, alcohol was central to producing that very ambivalence between commerce and sovereignty, hubris and anxiety, power and vulnerability that was at the core of English expansion in early modern Asia and around the globe.

Though the English East India Company did not begin in 1600 with immediate ambitions for settlement abroad, it did not take long for its leadership to recognize the importance of maintaining fortified, independent cities and factories across its hemispheric jurisdiction. Fuelled both by apprehensions about its susceptibility to Asian polities and in competition with and emulation of similar practices of both the Dutch and Portuguese, the English East India Company by the later seventeenth century had come to support its far-flung and sparse network of factories, officials, merchants, and ships in motion throughout Persia, coastal India, and the Indonesian archipelago with a handful of fortified towns, conceived of as colonies. Though all were either coastal ports or islands, each was embedded in a distinct geographical, jurisdictional, and political context. The first was Madras – which also came to be known synecdochically after its ‘Fort St George’ – acquired through treaty and grant from a local nayak and the Vijayanagar empire in 1639. This was followed by the Company’s acquisition of the formerly Dutch island of St Helena in the south Atlantic (1658) and the formerly Portuguese archipelago of Bombay (1668), both granted the Company by proprietorial patents from the English sovereign (in the one case, the Protector; in the other, the crown). Elsewhere, pre-existing Company factories (or trading stations) negotiated for rights to expand and fortify via both local and imperial grants and titles of authority, receiving such rights most notably in Bengkulu, on Sumatra, in 1685, and, perhaps most fatefully, through an appointment as zamindar in 1690 over what came to be known as Calcutta in Bengal. In each of these places, Company officials imagined, quixotically but inevitably presciently, cultivating large, wealthy polyglot populations and garrisons from which the Company could project a form of power to preserve its commercial and political rights in Asia.17

As both the stewards of a maritime commercial network and colonial proprietors and governors, Company officials could not help but confront any number of political and social realities, one of which was the utter ubiquity of alcohol among sailors, soldiers, and settlers alike. One finds frequent requests for wine to be sent from England from or on behalf of Company officials in seventeenth-century India. It was among a number of commodities, from silk to beaver hats, that people in England requested leave to send to family and friends in Company settlements. The Company’s governing Court of Committees (from 1709 called the Court of Directors) also dealt frequently

17 Or, at least, this is what I have argued: see, among other things, Philip J. Stern, The company-state: corporate sovereignty and the early modern foundations of the British empire in India (New York, NY, 2011).
with requests from ship captains to increase the allotment of wine for their voyages or from merchants, servants, or their relatives to abate the cost of freight for alcohol sent to Asia. Amounts varied wildly: in 1709, the Court of Directors received at least eight separate requests to allow wine to be shipped on Company vessels for employees’ use, with the governor of Madras himself requesting twelve chests be sent for his own use, and another two for a merchant in Calcutta. In that same year, the agent for John Russell, a member of the Calcutta council, requested that he be allowed money on deposit in London to be sent to him in a combination of pieces of eight—and wine.

Alcohol was thus a source of sociability and sentimentality, but it was also a medium of exchange and a means of remittance: that is, it was a form of money. It was, of course, a way to make money as well, one that linked the economies of the Atlantic and Indian ocean worlds. The most popular request for wine from seventeenth-century Englishmen in India seemed to be wine produced at Tenerife (with an occasional specification for the dry white Vidonia), the demand (and price) for which had grown significantly in England until it was displaced by Madeira in the following century. As early as 1635, one finds an East India Company ship captain petitioning for a greater allowance of ‘canary wine’ for his two ships. Indeed, one of the reasons that the Portuguese viceroy of Goa gave for the need to resist the growth of the Company’s settlement at Bombay in the 1660s was his fear of the ‘English selling better wines, which they bring from the Canaries’.

Yet as much as the wine trade rendered India, in David Hancock’s words, ‘in the Atlantic’, East Indian intoxicants also found their way to American markets. Arrack, a liquor commonly distilled from coconut or sugarcane, was evidently particularly prevalent. For example, when the ship Fame appeared in Philadelphia in 1724, it carried not only Palatine refugees for the colony, but also a thousand gallons of the spirituous liquor. Indeed, demand for it was so great in the 1730s that captains would carry illicit stocks in lieu sometimes of sails or extra water for the crew. Of course, arrack’s popularity in the

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19 Roger Braddyll to Thomas Woolley, 9 Dec. 1709, BL, IOR, E/1/1, pt 4, fo. 423.
20 Jonathan Winder to London, 9 Dec. 1709, BL, IOR, E/1/1, pt 4, fo. 421.
23 ‘Instructions from the Viceroy Antonio de Mello e Castro to Father Manuel Godinho concerning his conduct in this court upon the mission with which he was charged’, n.d. [1663?], BL, IOR, I/3/156, fo. 362.
Atlantic world was not to last, and by the mid- to late eighteenth century it was almost entirely displaced by rum, a similar liquor that was produced locally, far less expensively, and in immense quantities driven by the simultaneous expansion of the transatlantic slave trade.25

The East India Company also engaged in its own direct trade in Indian Ocean wines, especially in the highly demanded Persian wine from the region near Shiraz. It even attempted – without much success – to get into the wine-making business itself. In 1695, the Company’s translator at Shiraz had to pay a hefty tribute to keep the local vizier from putting a ‘full stop’ to their wine-making.26 Among nineteen propositions that the Company’s factors in Isfahan sought confirmed in a farman from the Persian shah in 1697, one concerned the right to make, drink, and export wine, while another insisted that the English be provided assistance in making their own.27 Company officials also clearly engaged in trade in Asian wine on their own private accounts. For example, Thomas Pitt, the interloper-turned-governor of Madras, purchased and disposed of wine on a fairly regular basis. In January 1700 he deposited a fairly significant sum of 97 pagodas (about £75) with an East India Company ship captain bound to Persia to pick him up various foodstuffs, such as rosewater, prunes, almonds, and ten chests of ‘the best Syraz Wine’.28 After all, his consumers were discriminating; in November 1699, for example, he complained to a correspondent that the wine that had been sent ‘proves not so good … looks very red’, and was not fetching the price he had hoped.29

The East India Company also tried to produce European wine on its south Atlantic island plantation of St Helena. As in a number of English American colonies, by the early 1690s it had imported both grapevines and French Huguenot refugees for the ‘improvement of the vines’, hoping to produce a vertically integrated source of wine production to capitalize on the Atlantic and Indian ocean market for arrack.30 This plan never seemed to get very far, and most of the French settlers ended up returning to England, but it does appear that, some decades later, the island had somehow produced a modest 140 gallons of wine.31 The Company had similar, if even more quixotic plans, at Bombay, where it made explicit the connection between the investment in wine production and the establishment of sound colonial policy, noting especially that the Dutch at the Cape had ‘improved planting Vineyards & Orchards, and setting up Stills, that good Rhenish wine is sold by the Planters

29 Thomas Pitt to Mr Raworth, 20 Nov. 1699, BL, Add. MS 22842, fo. 8.
to the Company, at 2 pieces of 8/8 p quarter Cask, and Brandy and Syder at proportionable low rates. Doing so was not merely a source of profit, however, but rather one of the ‘fresh instances’ of the ‘Dutch wisdom’ of raising revenue locally in support of all their Warrs, and the cause of their Sovereign Dominion in India’.  

If the sale of wine was one segment of the Company’s military-fiscal ambitions, alcohol was also highly prized, and highly used, as a form of gift and reward. Travellers’ accounts frequently cite how alcohol lubricated diplomatic, commercial, or other encounters between Europeans and the South Asians from whom they sought information, trade, shelter, protection, or simply conversation. The social strategy was no doubt mutual; as Amitav Ghosh reimagines it for one of the characters in a slightly later period in his novel *Sea of poppies*, repelled as he was by the pilot’s manner, he could not help reflecting on what a mercy it was that his ancestors had excluded wine and liquor from the list of things that could not be shared with unclean foreigners – it would be all but impossible, surely, to deal with them, if not for their drink?

Alcohol worked similarly among Europeans. The East India Company ship captain Sir Thomas Grantham, for example, reported in 1684 of his sending ‘a present worth about [£]45 in Wine Ale Mum beer &ca’ ashore at Dutch Batavia to ingratiate himself with the local governor. He used a similar tactic of claret diplomacy to open a dialogue with Richard Keigwin, the English Company-soldier-turned-rebel-leader at Bombay, whose ‘governorship’ of the island Grantham had been sent to relieve. Meanwhile, the Bombay council, in exile at Surat, delivered a chest of Shiraz – and some ‘good cheese’ – to the Portuguese governor at nearby Versova to persuade him to warn any approaching ships of Keigwin’s having taken the island in the first place.

Even among Englishmen, wine and other forms of alcohol served frequently as gifts of persuasion: when one Thomas Eatman, an Englishman at Surat – probably already drunk – allegedly exclaimed in frustration to John Hackney, ‘I do not care a fart for ye King and Company’, he quickly seemed to regret his outburst, offering Hackney six bottles of wine if he would not report his sedition. That we have the story to tell reveals that, in this case, the bribe did not work.

Wine and punch – a drink of sweetened and spiced arrack which Europeans picked up from Asian practices, and whose name derived from the Persian *panj*

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or Hindustani *panch*, referring to its standard ‘five’ ingredients – were frequently distributed during times of official celebration and ceremony, such as the reading of the commission of a newly appointed governor or celebrating king and Company. Alcohol was a means to fire up soldiers and subjects, as well as a way to supplement their income. The Company routinely dipped into its stocks to try to maintain its tenuous grip on the loyalty of its garrison, especially in trying times. For example, during the invasion and occupation of Bombay in 1689 by soldiers loyal to the Mughal empire, Governor John Child very liberally dispensed a supply of Shiraz wine to the soldiers; he ordered the distribution of two bottles to soldiers and more to sailors for three straight weeks soon after the beginning of the siege of Bombay’s fort, though presumably stocks ran short, as this liberality slowed over the next fourteen or so months of the siege. In 1724, Bombay even proposed continuing an allowance of arrack for the soldiery, in lieu of advancing their actual pay, suggesting that for ‘ Soldiers wholesomely fed with a moderate allowance of arrack, their healths are preserved better than formerly & the same may be Observed in their Countenances’.

II

This sanguine sense of the benefits of alcohol was hardly ubiquitous, and one might imagine not a little bit disingenuous. While wine, arrack, punch, and toddy – a distilled palm wine, which Europeans often substituted for hard-to-find beer – were critical to the financial, emotional, and cultural life of English soldiers, sailors, administrators, and subjects, they were also very much on the mind of the East India Company’s government. Alcohol, its import, and its points of sale were remarkably regulated, at least in theory. The Bombay government, for example, issued licences to tavern keepers, with the express purpose that ‘good subjects of their Majesties and the Right Hoble East India Companys Inhabitants … may know where to repair for a sober and moderate Refreshment at times Convenient’, on the condition that the licence-holder be of ‘good behaviour’ and charge only ‘reasonable rates’. The Company developed a similar policy at St Helena, forbidding the sale of alcohol or tobacco without a licence, which was limited to a year and cost

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40 Surat to Bombay, 30 June 1690, BL, IOR, E/3/48, fo. 186.
41 Bombay diary, 16, 24, and 31 Mar. 1688/9, BL, IOR, G/3/3/3, fos. 4, 7, 10. See also Margaret R. Hunt and Philip J. Stern, eds., The English East India Company at the height of Mughal expansion: a soldier’s diary of the 1689 siege of Bombay with related documents (Boston, MA, 2016).
44 ‘A license given to John Wright to sell punch & liquorr’, 30 May 1694, BL, IOR, G/3/10a, unpaginated.
45 Materials towards a statistical account of the town and island of Bombay, vol III: administration (Bombay, 1894), p. 274.
10 shillings. A duty of 10 shillings per hogshead of arrack, brandy, or wine imported to the island was also established.

Evidently, not everyone lived up to their obligations. In 1694, the Bombay government issued an ordinance setting prices on wine, ale, punch, and arrack, alongside limiting how much could be sold and consumed, but also mandating that anyone who requested it should be permitted to buy arrack, sugar, and lime water to make their own punch. Moreover, ‘if the bowl be not marked with the clerk of the market’s seal, then the bowl may be freely broken without paying anything either for bowl or punch’. The Company’s government in Madras exhibited similar concerns, regulating the sale of liquor, especially in taverns and boarding houses, self-consciously modelling its decrees on the 1660 parliamentary act governing the sale, adulteration, and price of wine in England. Such moves resembled similar measures taken by colonial authorities in seventeenth-century Ireland and the British Atlantic, whether the ban in the 1634 ‘Western Charter’ on taverns and alcohol sales in Newfoundland, licence fees and the imposition of a statutory limit on the number of taverns in Tangier in 1669, or the preoccupation with taverns in the earliest measures of the Philadelphia corporation – to name but a few admittedly randomly chosen examples.

Tavern and liquor licences, however, were not just about regulation and prohibition. They could serve as a way for local government to offer employment, social welfare, and reward for loyalty, such as the licence given to one Mrs Ogg, the widow of a soldier who had fought for the Company during Bombay’s invasion in 1690, or another for Ann Cannady, who immigrated there with her young daughter from St Helena about the same time. Licences were similarly held out as incentives for attracting settlers from elsewhere in Asia to Company colonies, as enticement or remuneration, or were simply sold to the highest bidder. Despite ostensible prohibitions or inhibitions in both Hindu and Muslim law and traditions, alcohol was, in the words of one scholar, ‘integral to the dynamics of pre-colonial India’, and there was a centuries (if not millennium)-long tradition of the distillation, sale, importation, and consumption of alcohol, especially arrack and toddy, across Asia. The Company certainly conceived of markets for arrack and punch, revenue

46 London to St Helena, 1 Aug 1683, BL, IOR, G/32/1, fo. 40; London to St Helena, 14 Mar. 1701, BL, IOR, G/32/1, fo. 33.
47 ‘Recital of laws and ordinances’, n.d. [1707?], BL, IOR, G/32/1, fo. 95; Materials towards a statistical account, p. 274.
48 ‘To all taverns and victualling house keepers on the island Bombay’, 13 Aug. 1694, BL, IOR, G/3/10a, unpaginated.
50 Bombay consultations, 14 June 1694, BL, IOR, G/3/4, fo. 5; Surat to Bombay, 11 Feb. 1692/3, BL, IOR, E/3/49, fo. 205.
farms, and tavern houses as opportunities that might entice more Chinese merchants to settle and set up shop in places like Madras and Bengkulu.52

A share of arrack sales and revenue was perhaps even more critical as one of a number of strategies to lure settlers to Bombay from nearby Portuguese Goa, which itself had become a centre of arrack production.53 By the late 1730s, the arrack farm – which was in essence a monopoly to sell and tax arrack and toddy across the island – came to be held by a group of bhandari residents, and was renewed several times without public auction, despite standing orders from London to always put farms to the highest bidder and even though ‘it might possibly have let out for more than the Bhandaris give’. Making their case, the bhandaris cited their long residency on the island, their loyalty and, of course, their long history cultivating palm and selling arrack since before the Company took control of Bombay. The island’s council agreed, and accepted the diminished revenue as worth the cost, the Bhandaris being a very useful set of people and of all our inhabitants the most to be depended on in any exigency, they being of a military caste and having on several occasions behaved with courage, we should be very glad to preserve those already upon the island as well as encourage others to come and settle among us.

Moreover, ‘by keeping the Bhandaris satisfied, we may rely on their fidelity which will be a great addition to the strength of the island upon an emergency’. Conversely, in the wake of recent conflicts with Maratha powers on the island of Salsette to the north and a threatened invasion of Bombay, the council feared alienating the community, lest ‘the Marathas by their emissaries would privately endeavour to inflame them to shake off their allegiance to this Government’.54

Thus, while alcohol – along with tobacco, betel, cannabis, and other intoxicants – certainly made money for the Company, it was perhaps more valuable as an object and tool of governance, a way in which East India Company officials on the ground could both incentivize and regulate good behaviour and good order, and try to keep the often small but querulous civic bodies happy, and perhaps ever so slightly inebriated. When alcohol did earn the Company income, it reflected less its capacity as a merchant – in direct trade of alcohol as a commodity – than its role as a government, via revenue from duties, customs, licensing fees, and the like.55 Such revenues fit a much larger pattern and plan in the seventeenth-century Company to raise local revenue in order to support defence and government: building walls, fortifications, courthouses, and other civic infrastructure intended to set the Company’s cities on a permanent and enduring footing. Indeed, customs on arrack at Bombay was

52 London to Madras, 30 Sept. 1684, BL, IOR, E/3/90, fo. 227; Winterbottom, Hybrid knowledge, p. 79.
55 Winterbottom, Hybrid knowledge, p. 73; Chatterjee, ‘Lives of alcohol’, p. 204.
one of handful of tax farms that were, in theory at least, annually put out for auction: in 1685, the arrack farm sold at 9,020 Xeraphins, when the oil rent was only 2,130 and the cotton rent could not even sell; a decade later, the price had been depressed, no doubt in large part due to the invasion and occupation of the island by forces of the Mughal-allied Sidi of Janjira in 1690, though it was still the second most lucrative duty farmed, surpassed only by tobacco. Even more than the idea of producing alcohol locally, Bombay was reminded that central to the Dutch ‘wisdom’ of raising local revenue was maintaining a vertically integrated monopoly on wine sales:

no Planter must sell Liquor to any, but to the Compa[ny] only, and ye Tavernes that are allowed at the Cape must and doe each of them pay the Compa 2400 Guilders p Ann for the Lycences to keep publique houses, and its death to any to sell Liquors without a Lycence or to goe a board any Ship in the road, without Lycence of the Governour, its possible you will not think it prudence to set our Lycences at such a high rate presently, but you may reasonably double or treble your former rates, and allow the Retailers of Lyquors to sell their Lyquors at proportionable dearer rates than they did formerly. We can give you noe exact rule in this, but leave it to your discretion, to advance our revenue by degrees, and to make such By-Laws for the good Government of the place, and encrease of our own revenue as you shall find necessary.57

Such sentiments recurred throughout the Company’s settlements in late seventeenth-century Asia, such as at Bengkulu, where the arrack and opium licences were similarly part of a larger plan to ‘defray charges Garrison and all necessary repairs’.58

Company leadership recognised that setting out laws was one thing, but compliance was quite another. Anticipating objections to such customs, London observed to Madras that, ‘If any Commanders or Officers of Ships or others refuse to pay the Custome at Fort St. George of Wine or any other sort of Liquor or goods’, the Company would do so on the other end in London, by deducting it from their freight or permissible allowances on prohibited goods. Even more importantly, Company leadership anticipated the objections themselves, and their pre-emptive answer was telling as to the vision they had developed for the Company’s system in India. The duties on wine rendered them not a merchant monopolizing a trade, but rather a colonial plantation, no different from those in the Atlantic world:

And if they pretend that old foolish objection that such Liquors &ca have paid excise and Custome here to his Ma[jes]ty already, We suppose you are wise enough of yourselves to tell them, that which they likewise

56 Bombay consultations, 3 Apr. 1685, BL, IOR, G/3/3/1, fo. 52; Bombay consultations, 1 Mar. 1696/7, BL, IOR, G/3/5, fo. 15.
58 Bengkulu to Court of Managers, 18 Sept. 1706, BL, IOR, G/35/6, fo. 22.
know already, that all such Liquors which have paid Dutyes in England must notwithstanding pay the Dutyes of Ireland, Scotland, Barbadoes, Virginia or any other place or plantation of his Matys when they arrive there.\textsuperscript{59}

Not everyone objected. The Company was pleased, for example, to hear from Madras in 1687 that one ship captain, who had put into port there, was ‘convinced of the necessity of raising a good revenue to maintaine & support the English Interest in India’ and ‘hath promised to be willingly exemplar in payment of our Custome of 5 pct for his Wines’.\textsuperscript{60} Whether one should believe a report of such a selflessly civic-minded skipper or not is an open question but the enthusiastic report from the Fort St George council to its superiors in London indicated, if nothing else, that convincing people that peaceably paying taxes was in their own interest had become central to its charge.

Conversely, abuses of the licensing or farming regimes were subject to punishment and reprisal. The trade and regulation of wine and spirits thus resonated with the Company’s broader concerns about both its commercial and political establishment, from discipline and order to regulating the economy. In 1685, Bombay began to require any inhabitants seeking to resell arrack from Goa to purchase a licence for punch sales, as a means to protect the value of the arrack rent.\textsuperscript{61} Likewise, in 1698, the Company’s leadership in London instructed the council at St Helena to restrict the distilling of arrack – unless they bought the wood required for the process from the Company itself:

\begin{quote}
We observe and hear by others which Came from that Island that there is a very Great Trade drove in the Island of Distilling Arrack from Roots and fruits, which will soon Consume the Greatest Part of the Wood on the Island (if it be not Speedily prevented). We do therefore hereby Order & appoint that no persons upon the Island be permitted to Still Arrack Except they Compound with you for the Companys Wood they expend in Distilling after the Rate of Twelve Pence p hundred weight for all the Companys wood spent by Distillation and also pay your Four Pence p Gallon upon all low Wines of the first running of such Distilled Liquors for the Companys use.\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

Drink was, of course, also dangerous in itself, sometimes even inadvertently: in 1635, one Company sailor, Richard Tigg, was invalided home and ended up drawing on charity from the Company’s alms house at Poplar after a tierce of sack wine fell on him aboard ship and broke his legs.\textsuperscript{63} More often, the promise of alcohol as a source of revenue, governance, and order was matched, if not exceeded, by the threat that was posed by persistent and rampant

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{59} London to Madras, 8 Apr. 1687, BL, IOR, E/3/91, fo. 144.
\item \textsuperscript{60} London to Madras, 12 Oct. 1687, BL, IOR, E/3/91, fo. 221.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Bombay consultations, 9 Apr. 1685, BL, IOR, G/3/3/1, fo. 56.
\item \textsuperscript{62} London to St Helena, 5 Dec. 1698, BL, IOR, G/32/1, fo. 53.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Sainsbury, ed., \textit{Calendar of the court minutes}, p. 96.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
drunkenness – or at least the fear and accusation of such. Certainly, drink was a narrative trope invoked by European travellers to mark difference, both with Europeans and with their ethnological and classificatory accounts of South Asian society and practices; drunkenness frequently marked the South Asians they encountered as alternately ‘irrational’, mystical, exotic, and threatening. However, Company concerns over inebriation were perhaps even more acute when it came to fellow Englishmen. Ships, garrisons, and overseas settlements were deeply unpleasant places, and no doubt drink was, as elsewhere around the European colonial world, a way to dull the pain and pass the time, but its ubiquity did not make it any less an anxiety, at least ostensibly, for government. Thus, while the Company continued to plot schemes for building vineyards at St Helena, it simultaneously complained that the inhabitants there had become

prodigious wasteful People ... to consume so much Arrack yearly besides the Wine which the Island has been supply’d with by Us & others no won-der that their Lot is Beggary and that three or four on the Iland grow rich by the folly & prodigality of the rest. Let it then from hence forward be your Care by Precept Example and well timed admonitions to curb this mischievous Vice so many ways destructive to the Body Estate & Reputation of those guilty of it.

The 1694 Bombay licences to tavern keepers explicitly excluded the higher-proof palm toddy and mahuda, which were, rightly or not, perceived as more inebriating and dangerous to both health and civil order. Similarly, in 1695 the Bengkulu government tried, apparently unsuccessfully, to prohibit the sale of arrack or other spirits outright, ‘being found pernicious to ye place not only the solludiers but also others of the Right Honorable Company’s servants Idly and profusely spending their time and money in them’. In the wake of Keigwin’s rebellion, the local government issued a proclamation to similar effect; having found there to be twenty-one punch houses on the island, they ordered that only four licences be given out. Moreover, the council issued a proclamation requiring all Protestants on the island to attend church on Sundays, as well as weekly morning prayer, adding ‘that if in time of devine Service on Sundaies or at any other holy dayes any Souldier or Inhabitant shall frequent publique houses where they sell wine, Punch, or other liquors, such Souldier or inhabitant shall be Strictly punished, and the housekeeper exemplarily fined’. Regulations at Surat, meanwhile, insisted

64 For a discussion of European representations of drink among both South Asians and Europeans in India, see Chatterjee, ‘Lives of alcohol’, pp. 203–5, 207–16.
65 London to St Helena, 22 Feb. 1716/17, BL, IOR, E/3099, fo. 88.
66 Materials towards a statistical account, p. 274.
67 Bengkulu consultations, 2 July 1695, BL, IOR, G/35/3, fo. 18.
68 Bombay consultations, 25 Apr. 1685, BL, IOR, G/3/3/1, fo. 61.
69 Bombay consultations, 9 Feb. 1684/5, BL, IOR, G/3/3/1, fo. 29.
that ‘He that leads a debauched life in Swearing drunkenness or whoredome’ should be suspended from service.\textsuperscript{70}

Drunkenness, as a crime against religion and morality, was thus a crime against government and the state. It is therefore no surprise that George Wilcox, upon his arrival as chief judge at Bombay in 1672, first proclaimed a fast, and then issued a proclamation ‘against the breach of the sabbath, profaneness, drunkenness, and uncleanness’.\textsuperscript{71} Quite obviously, this was a problem of regulation and obedience of soldiery, but the problem ran deeper, as, conceptually, drunkenness and rebelliousness were closely related. London warned the nascent colony in Sumatra to enlist loyal soldiers from Madras to balance out what they considered to be the more untrustworthy elements of their garrison: ‘Sumatrans, Madagascar Blacks, or mutinous drunken English’.\textsuperscript{72} Bombay similarly requested London try to send more sober soldiers, particularly Germans and other foreigners that are ‘more frugall, lesse given to drinke … than the English who cannot live without flesh & strong drinke’.\textsuperscript{73}

Requests such as this were common and relentless. London insisted, however, that the solution was not to change human nature, or somehow find better soldiers or settlers, but rather to govern them better once arrived: ‘You do well in desiring that the Soldiers we send you out should be sober men, or plain honest Country men’, Bombay was instructed in 1686, but it was impossible to tell a ‘drunken mutinous Knave from an honest man’ when hiring him in London. The Company leadership argued that ‘It is not our Choice of Souldiers here but your Strict Military discipline and martial law must make Bombay a sober Garrison.’\textsuperscript{74} A good garrison was to be kept under ‘sober order under strict military discipline’.\textsuperscript{75} Bombay’s chief judge complained in 1688 that a high-ranking soldier who had been rude to him was said to be ‘a sober diligent officer’ but ‘on the contrary he is an Impudent proud druncken fellow’.\textsuperscript{76} Company leadership in London wrote in the same year equating Englishmen keeping unauthorized punch houses with the highest crime in the Company’s imagination, interloping, and ‘a thousand ill things formerly like irregular & outlaw’d persons, without any order or obedience to the Chiefs of their own Nation’.\textsuperscript{77}

If drunken behaviour was easily elided with ungovernable behaviour,\textsuperscript{78} conversely, sobriety could be read as or argued to be a sign of trustworthiness in an environment that had few other reliable measures of, or instruments to maintain, loyalty and obedience. Sobriety was both a mark of and a metonym

\textsuperscript{70} ‘Rules to be observed by all Englishmen that live in the factory of Suratt’, 2 July 1696, BL, IOR, G/36/95, fo. 47.
\textsuperscript{71} ‘G. Wilcox on the establishment of English law in Bombay’, 30 Dec. 1672, BL, Add. MS 39255, fo. 41.
\textsuperscript{72} London to Pryaman, 21 Oct. 1685, BL, IOR, E/3/91, fo. 4.
\textsuperscript{73} Surat to London, 22 Jan. 1677, BL, IOR, E/3/37, fo. 166.
\textsuperscript{74} London to Bombay, 26 Mar. 1686, BL, IOR, E/3/91, fo. 58.
\textsuperscript{75} London to Bombay, 15 Feb. 1688/9, BL, IOR, E/3/92, fo. 10.
for trustworthiness, as when the Company leadership in London insisted that they had dramatically expanded the powers of John Child as general over their affairs in India so that ‘all our Affairs might be settled in faithful sober hands’.79 At the same time the Company seemed attuned to the relationship between drink and duty. One Captain Consett was to be trusted because he ‘appears a man of ingenuity and understanding not at all given to drink, nor in the least seemingly passionate’.80 As the Court of Committees wrote in 1698, the sobriety of St Helena’s officers was the basis for their recommendation that they be given ‘the Privilidge of wearing swords’.81 The council at Bombay recommended one soldier under its command for a commission, as he was now ‘wholly reclaim’d from drunkenness and is become a New man fitt to be intrusted’.82

III

In any number of ways, then, the traffic, sale, and consumption of alcohol were central in shaping the spaces of Company sovereignty. Like other commodities and even correspondence from home,83 wine in particular compressed the long distances between the people and places of early English Asia and England, serving as a fundament of social life, maintaining family connections, and providing means of reward and punishment, support, income, and currency. As a yardstick by which people could be judged and characterized as credible and loyal, alcohol served as a means of surveillance and control, both locally and across half a world. In some ways, the alcohol trade also reframes our spatial imagination of oceanic zones themselves, creating connections that must at least undermine any hard and fast distinctions we may have between the Atlantic and Indian ocean worlds.

Yet, perhaps most importantly, alcohol was key to shaping the jurisdictional spaces of Company authority, and especially the forts and cities that were the backbone of its fledgling seventeenth-century network, as a source of revenue, regulation of behaviour, and ways in which the Company could govern both the bodies of its subjects and the sites of alcohol’s consumption, such as taverns, as potential and critical markers of loyalty and disloyalty. In turn, drunkenness and sobriety were powerful and ubiquitous political languages, which could be used to justify the promulgation of law, the extraction of revenue, and the establishment of a nascent regulatory state. They were also a tool one could use to manipulate and influence that state, accusations of drunkenness and disobedience being either weapons against one’s enemies or simply tropes to employ to entreat the Company’s government to action. Thus, alcohol served as a protean and ambivalent political and social symbol

80 Hunt and Stern, eds., Soldier’s diary, p. 131.
81 London to St Helena, 5 Dec. 1698, BL, IOR, G/32/1, fo. 52.
82 Bombay to Surat, 14 Feb. 1690/1, BL, IOR, G/36/110/1, fo. 45.
83 See Miles Ogborn, Indian ink: script and print in the making of the English East India Company (Chicago, IL, 2007).
that could mark both dutifulness and disobedience, loyalty and treason, reward and regulation all at the same time. Yet, ambivalence should not be mistaken for ambiguity or equivocation. It was precisely alcohol’s multivalent character as a source of advantage and anxiety that exposed but also shaped the East India Company’s nature as both merchant and sovereign. Drink, as it turned out, was one of a number of aspects of life in the seventeenth-century colonial world that helped reconcile the twin aspects of the Company that Adam Smith later found so incongruous: the critical ‘spirits’ of both trade and sovereignty, found in the punch house, church, and fort alike.

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